

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME

(Spastic Colon; Colitis)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

An irritative and inflammatory disorder of the intestine. It is not contagious, inherited or cancerous. It is twice as likely to affect women as men.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The following symptoms usually begin in early adult life. Episodes may last for days, weeks or months.

- Cramp-like pain in the middle or to one side of the lower abdomen. Pain is usually relieved with bowel movements.
- Nausea.
- Bloating and gas.
- Headache.
- Rectal pain.
- Backache.
- Occasional appetite loss that may lead to weight loss.
- Diarrhea or constipation, usually alternating.
- Fatigue.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Concentration difficulty.

CAUSES

- Unknown. May be related to stress and emotional conflict that results in anxiety or depression. Situations that often precede an attack include obsessive worry about everyday problems; marital tension; fear of loss of a beloved person or object; and death of a loved one.
- Symptoms may also be triggered by eating, although no specific food has been identified as responsible.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Stress.
- Improper diet.
- Smoking.
- Excess alcohol consumption.
- Use of drugs.
- Fatigue or overwork.
- Poor physical fitness.
- Other family members with similar bowel problems.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Reduce stress or try to modify your response to it, and pay attention to good dietary habits.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The condition is usually recurrent throughout life. Symptoms decrease or may disappear for periods of time. It is not life-threatening and doesn't progress to cancer or inflammatory disease.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Psychological fixation on bowel function, leading to psychological disability.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include laboratory studies, including stool studies, to exclude other disorders such as lactose intolerance, ulcers, parasites, enzyme deficiency and ulcerative colitis; X-ray of the colon (barium enema); and sigmoidoscopy (method of examining the rectum and lower part of the colon with an optical instrument with a lighted tip).
- Warm heat (compresses, hot-water bottle, or heating pad) to the abdomen may help ease discomfort.
- Reduce stress in your life. Try various techniques that can help you relax (meditation, self-hypnosis, or biofeedback). Keep a stress diary so you know who or what may bring on symptoms.
- Medication may help, but it will not cure this disorder.
- Quit smoking. Nicotine may contribute to the problem.
- Additional information available from the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, Box NDDIC, Bethesda, MD 20892, (301) 468-6344.

MEDICATIONS

- Antispasmodics to relieve severe abdominal cramps may be prescribed.
- Short-term use of tranquilizers to reduce anxiety.
- Other possibilities include bulk-producing agents, constipating agents, anticholinergics, antifatulents and lactose for milk intolerance.

ACTIVITY

No restrictions. Regular physical activity improves bowel function and helps reduce stress.

DIET

- Increase fiber in the diet to promote good bowel function. Add fiber to your diet slowly to give the body time to adjust.
- Don't eat foods or drinks that aggravate symptoms. Coffee or milk may be a major cause of symptoms in some people. Keep a food diary so you can find out which foods aggravate symptoms.
- Avoid gas-producing and spicy foods.
- Avoid large meals, but eat regularly.
- Limit alcohol consumption.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- Fever develops.
- Stool is black or tarry-looking.
- Vomiting occurs.
- Unexplained weight loss of 5 pounds or more occurs.
- Symptoms don't improve despite treatment.